The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTMAS

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:1-7

In my file of Christmas materials, in the very front so I won't miss it, I keep an essay which I read every year as I approach the task of preparing a sermon for Christmas Sunday. It was written in 1933 by the late Reinhold Niebuhr.

Niebuhr was a German Reformed pastor, then a very popular professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and author of many widely read books. In 1933 he was becoming the most influential, distinguished theologian in the country. This is what he wrote that I think is important for the preacher to read the week before Christmas:

> "I went to church in the Cathedral on Christmas Day. It is one of the few days of the year in which I am able to attend church without preaching myself. On that day, though a Reformed Protestant myself, I prefer a liturgical church with as little sermon as possible. It is not that I do not like to hear anyone but myself preach, I merely dislike most Christmas and Easter sermons. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories, and there are not many poets in the pulpit. It is better therefore to be satisfied with the symbolic presentations of the poetry in hymn, anthem and liturgy." [*The Christian Century,* 10/12/83]

And so it is no coincidence that throughout the land a lot of us are turning things over to the choir on the occasion. It is no coincidence that this Sunday and this week the poets and musicians get the last word, because we all know that their art has a far better chance of conveying, describing and celebrating the Christmas event than the words of the preacher.

However, there are far too many of you here this morning for me not at least to try. But I do so, recalling Reinhold Niebuhr's confession.

> "The sermons which interpret the Christmas story usually make a rational defense of its historic validity or they qualify it rationally to make it acceptable to the intellect. I have preached many of the latter type in my own parish days, but now I feel sorry for the people who had to listen to them."

The challenge for the preacher and the congregation is to preach and hear a story that is bigger than our ability to describe it. It is to go to a place we have visited many times before and to discover among the familiar faces and figures relevance and meaning. The challenge is to hear the story again, but more than the story, lovely as it is, to know its meaning and its particular and personal message to you and to me.

It happened for me last Thursday evening, at the end of a long and busy day. I dropped into an event in one of our meeting rooms and found myself transfixed, standing in a corner pondering the wonders of God's love.

The event was a Christmas celebration sponsored by our Tutoring Parents Program, the Tutoring organization actually. Some of the mothers have been meeting while their children are being tutored — for two years. They are African American and Hispanic.

It's quite fashionable and certainly politically correct to talk and think about what it means to be a "multi-cultural society." But there are people who live together with other people who are very different ılturally from themselves. I suspect they don't spend a lot of time discussing the meaning of multi-ulturalism because they're so busy living in it. And besides, sometimes they can't communicate because they speak different languages. So this little program of ours invites Spanish speaking parents of Tutoring youngsters and African American parents to spend time together and in the process to learn the language of the

other group. Spanish speakers learn English, African Americans learn Spanish. And, you know, as you learn another person's language, you almost always feel a little closer to that person, a little less separate and distanced.

So at Christmas they all get together and exchange gifts and have some punch and cookies and sing a few carols in English and Spanish. Everybody gets introduced and thanked. One woman recited a poem she had written called "Mother Africa." And at the end the participants stood up and faced each other, African American women and Mexican American women — recently arrived actually, and one by one — in the new language they are learning, haltingly said, "Good evening, my name is . . ., Merry Christmas." It isn't much actually, but in a world badly divided ethnically, in a city where people of different races and cultures don't always get along, and where violence continues to claim the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable — these parents — trying to communicate — is something at least. It was enough to slow me down and remind me that the celebration of the birth of Jesus is about a reconciling, healing love which has its source in God, but which has its actuality and incarnation when it starts to get expressed between people who reach out to one another in affection, common humanity, acceptance.

The challenge for preacher and congregation is to hear the story but also more . . . the challenge is to remember that the celebration is about God's love becoming incarnate, tangible, real. The challenge is to hold beside the story of the birth in Bethlehem those magnificent words of the Fourth Gospel.

> "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.
> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

It is a story of human birth and also the story of a mystery so vast, our intellects can't begin to grasp it. The challenge is to return to the familiar Bethlehem creche and to pause in wonder not only at the everyday miracles of human birth, but that unspeakable miracle, that it has been the experience of millions and millions of men and women that in this birth the holy God has come to us, has found us. That to go to Bethlehem and to know what happened there is for each of us a very personal homecoming.

And the challenge is to avoid seasonal sentimentalism.

The story is about the birth of a child who became a man. The baby grew up, became the man Jesus, taught that human life becomes what God created it to be when people love without condition, and forgive one another, and take care of the least among them. The baby grew up, became a man, and so challenged the way religious people ordinarily think that they ended up crucifying him.

Kathleen Norris, in *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography,* remembers that her childhood Sunday School theology was so full of pleasantness and goodness she never knew Jesus was crucified until she encountered a reference to it in a motion picture. "We were too busy being cheerful," she said. And I was reminded of the annual controversies over nativity scenes in public places, city halls and public schools and this year a Northwest Side fire station, which the American Civil Liberties Union forced to remove the creche that had been displayed for years. The firemen were upset, but a car dealer resolved the issue by putting Mary, Joseph and baby in his new car showroom.

I was reminded of the proponents of the use of public spaces for Christmas displays are reduced to arguing that the Bethlehem manger, after all, is not particularly religious, but has become a cultural icon like Rudolph and Santa, is essentially harmless and empty of spiritual significance. At least the American Civil Liberties Union takes Christmas seriously, religiously!

Beverly Gaventa, a New Testament scholar at Princeton Seminary, in a *Christian Century* article this week describes the way the culture has fallen in love with the birth almost in a way that disguises the rest of the story. Professor Gaventa writes,

> "To welcome the little plastic figure in the creche, the Jesus we know and love, without recognizing that this Jesus disturbs our comfortable world is to make of Christmas nothing more than a season for ordering poinsettias and sending greeting cards." [*The Christian Century,* 12/15/93]

The story of the birth in Bethlehem is not really heard, I submit, if it is merely a sweetly sentimental occasion to be sung about and adored annually. If, on the other hand, it is the birth of one we claim as Lord, one to whom we entrust our lives, our future, our deaths, it becomes an enormously pregnant occasion full of potential for change and growth and depth and passion and our lives are, as the poet Rilke said, "part of the history of a great pregnancy."

Martin Luther started the Reformation, faced down the Holy Roman Empire, wrote some magnificent theology, translated the Bible into German and on the subject of the birth of Jesus wrote some very simple but heartfelt sermons.

> "Shame on you wretched Bethlehem," Luther thundered. "The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone" for turning away the holy family. "There are many of you in this congregation," Luther said, "who think to yourselves, 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen.' Yes, you would . . . because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at the time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ himself." [p. 330]

The challenge is not to disconnect the lovely story from its ethical implications: to love the child by loving the children, the specific children — our children — the children of our city — our nation — our world: to serve the Christ by reaching out in service to our dear ones, our friends, neighbors, strangers in need, that is to be converted by God's love in Jesus Christ, to be transformed into lovers.

Leonard Sweet wrote,

> "At Christmas we are called to birth and cradle Christ in our own lives — to wrap our arms around our faith. When we birth and cradle Christ in our ordinary lives by faith, we find our arms wrapping around others who need Christ birthed and cradled in their lives." [*Homiletics,* Oct.–Dec., 1993, p. 48]

And the challenge is to let this small event become a source of joy everyday of the year; to choose joy and hope over the available and ever-present alternatives, sadness, despair and cynicism. How actually does one sustain an attitude of joy and hope in a world like this? It's a very serious question. Is it not naive or worse yet, dishonest, to profess to be joyful in a world where innocent little ones are hungry and homeless, or abused, or killed in the senseless violence of our city? Is it not more honest to take reality at face value, to be a cynic, expecting the worst because the worst has a way of happening?

Henri Nouwen is a Dutch priest and theologian who has decided to spend the last years of his professional fe, not in the comfort of a classroom at Yale, where he was teaching, or traveling and lecturing, but is living and working in a L'Arch Community in Canada which provides residential hospitality and care for mentally and physically handicapped adults. He writes, understandably,

> "I am tempted to be so impressed by the obvious sadness of the human condition that I no longer claim the joy manifesting itself in many small but very real ways. It's a very basic choice you and I make," Nouwen says, "cynicism or joy. I know there is not peace everywhere and all pain has not been taken away, but I still see people turning and returning home: I hear voices that pray. I notice moments of forgiveness, and I witness many signs of hope. I don't have to wait until all is well, but I can celebrate every little hint of the kingdom that is at hand."
> [*The Return of the Prodigal Son,* p. 107/108]

The challenge? Joy instead of cynicism! To see hints of the kingdom that is at hand. Is that not exactly what happened in Bethlehem of Judea? A child was born, an ordinary human birth, a peasant couple from a remote village on the edge of the Roman Empire, far even from their own home, . . . not exactly an enormous reorganization of the human situation by its creator, certainly not a dramatic ripping open of heavens for the divine descent, but rather a quiet event, full of gentle love, full of the unique power of love, full of high and holy hope.

The challenge is to celebrate it, to allow it access to your spirit, to birth and cradle the child in your heart and your attitudes and your behavior.

So, may we celebrate, may we bring our art and poetry and music which expresses for us what none of our words ever says adequately; and listening to the words and the music may we know both the familiar birth and the vast mystery of God's love.

And as we address our cards and give our gifts and exchange our greetings, may we reach out to one another in the love that is given to us all, and may our love cause us to care more and do more and give more and therefore to live more.

And as we return to Bethlehem of Judea, such a familiar place, may it be for us our homecoming to the God who in this birth has come to meet us and find us.

May we bring gifts to him in our gratitude: our love, our faith, our passion, our hope . . . our hearts. Amen.